
3a. iii. The Dark Side of Multitude

---- Three Essays on the 2004 American Election, Part Three

(Yang SU)

Not long after the election, my weary and sorrowful days merged into a season of holidays. Decorations on the street brought in a new mood, a mood that tries to keep politics afar. In the daytime when I drive past house after house, I imagine their residents, for the first time in a long time, as real people rather than as poll numbers. For a moment, I no longer see them as Republicans or Democrats, but Americans. I further imagine that during the holiday season, many of these American houses would be open to guests from all over the world. Turkey gravy and apple pie are distinctively American, so is their makers' willingness to share.

For a few years back when I was a student, we were invited to thanksgiving dinners by Mrs. Lynch, a retired librarian, and one time mayor of her small city. She lived alone in an upscale neighborhood in the Bay Area. We met her because she volunteered to help international students for our university. She had hosted one of us, and then she began to invite our group of Chinese students every year. Occasionally we were joined by students from other countries such as Israel, Iran, South Korea, and Ghana. We usually brought the whole family along, including our children and visiting parents. For a party with so many people, it must have taken her one full day's work to prepare food. I had no idea what Mrs. Lynch's politics was. I would guess she was likely a Republican, for I remember she had once made a negative comment on labor unions.

If those dinner parties in Mrs. Lynch's house were emblematic, elsewhere we routinely encounter similar kindness, generosity, and compassion in this country. No comment on "American people" will be complete without noting their kindness, generosity and compassion. In my last essay, however, I ventured to comment on "American people." I have invoked the concept of "American nationalism" and pointed out its critical role in Bush's undeserving reelection; I have cited the history of the Vietnam War to show the reluctance for the majority of Americans to reject a wrong war; and I have cited this year's poll numbers to show the erroneous perceptions held by the majority of Bush supporters. Through that litany of negatives, I seem to have cast Americans in a rather negative light.

What I intended, instead, is to raise an intellectual puzzle in an apparent contradiction. How do we reconcile these two images of the "American people"—the electoral public that often seems indifferent to others' suffering vs. the real individuals who we find as compassionate as any people in the world? If we had not had the opportunities to interact with real people in America, including those conservative Bush supporters, we might have an easy task of reconciling; we could simply accuse them as being a people full of imperialism and chauvinism. But we know them, many of them personally; and we know that they are not only kind and generous, but also eager to learn and embrace things that are different. It is hard for anyone to claim that American people as a whole are any less open-minded and compassionate than any other groups in the world, say, we Chinese people.

Recognizing the goodness in individual Americans only deepens the puzzle. Why do the majority of them seem to be at times willing to support causes that not only bring out death, destruction and humiliation to other nations, but also bring back enduring pain on the United States? The 10-year Vietnam War is one of such examples. Aside of the destruction wrought on Vietnam, the war's trauma has been deeply ingrained in the American national conscience, as has the 10-year Cultural Revolution on the Chinese national memory. And I submit that the current Iraq War is another such example. In a Vietnamese noodle restaurant in Southern California, I often see a Vietnam War veteran sitting alone next to our table. I wonder that years from now, there will be many Iraqi restaurants across America. There

will be a new generation of veterans who have developed a taste for another ethnic cuisine by way of their war missions. But that legacy will be sadly expensive, for as of this writing, the number of injured American GIs is reaching 9,000. At this historical conjunction, it is painful to witness the American electorate reelect George W. Bush, an act that essentially lends their stamp of approval on his war-making and his war conduct. With the election victory under his belt, Bush's November has witnessed the record number of deaths of US soldiers per month in Iraq (135). In the same month when Iraqi cities like Fallujah (population 250,000) are being reduced into ground zero, other statistics of misery increase as painfully.

The world is no stranger to regrettable popular support for harmful politicians. The most famous example is of course the democratic election of Hitler in 1933. We Chinese people, many of whom were once subjects of Chairman Mao, have had our share of popular support for engineers of catastrophe and injustice. No, I do not mean to compare George W. Bush to Hitler or Mao. Nor do I consider the public in the American democracy as "fanatic" as those under Hitler or Mao. But that is precisely the point: we expect more from America in the 21st century. We often lament on the tragedies of the past and believe their reason to be the absence of democratic institutions. But given a free press, freedom of speech and many other democratic institutions, why is the public in this society still subject to manipulation and hence often duped into political decisions that will likely prove to be disastrous?

This question has challenged many observers, past and present. A classic answer, a Marxist one, is to attribute it to false class consciousness. Democratic politics is portrayed as no more than a disguise that covers class exploitation. In another line of analysis, contemporary political scientists cite the ignorance of voters on political issues. In Anthony Downs' apt phrase, they are "rationally ignorant:" they rather spend time on other things such as entertainments than paying attention to policy issues. Time and again research reveals and confirms this thesis of "ignorant electorate." For example, one national survey shows that about 1.9 percent of the American public could name as many as half of the members of the U.S. Supreme Court. If the survey also asked American adults to name five starters on their city's major league baseball team, the percentage will certainly be well above 1.9. Few Americans, it appears, are deeply familiar with the operation of their government. In a third line of explanation, scholars remark that the incumbent administration is the predominant source of news for the mass media, which in turn greatly dictates what the public knows. That way, the public can be duped even with free press.

In this essay, I plan to borrow an insight from sociology in an attempt to add some light to the question. The insight is that individuals sometimes—particularly when the information for facts is hard to come by—evaluate reality not from reality itself, but from their fellow observers. This cognitive habit of human beings becomes especially salient in situations of emergency (time does not allow a thorough investigation) or otherwise of extreme uncertainty (the issue too complex for the lay public, for example). This insight, supported by social psychological experiments, may provide a glimpse into the social basis for political manipulation.

Consider you are in the middle of a crowd swarmed into a building. Suddenly everyone is running away from an alleged fire. Will you be inclined, and able, to check whether the fire is real, or just follow the human flow leaving the building? Or consider you are in a village that is in an oral dispute with another. News arises one night that the other village is planning an attack on your fellow villagers. Will you be inclined, and able, to study the truthfulness of the claim, or just heed the call for a preemptive attack? In both scenarios one may not be able to verify the truth before an action, yet the action may be precisely based on the assumption of the truth. There exists something beyond individual goodness. The situations dictate the outcome; it matters little whether the individual person is otherwise wise and kind. It is a mysterious mechanism in which "Good people may do bad things when together."

It is the dark side of multitude.

Despite festivities at the year's end, my post-election nights are still haunted. In dream I find my mind ghosting into some bygone laboratories of social psychology, in mental excursions in search for light from the dark. Like many of my colleagues in social science research, I am subdued and perplexed by the election outcome. If our attitude toward the people's power often swings between admiration and apprehension, it has certainly been pushed to the latter by the outcome of this year's election. As discussed earlier, the majority of the American electorate reelected Bush based on many erroneous assumptions. How can people in an open society still get the information so wrong?

In his famous experiment conducted in the late 1930s, Professor Muzafer Sherif's subjects were seated in a room that was absolutely dark—so dark that those inside could see nothing but a point of light. After directly gazing the light for a few moments, the light seemed to move and then disappear. The subjects were asked to estimate the distance the light had moved.

In fact the light had never moved, and the "distance" was only illusion.

Subjects nonetheless dutifully reported what they observed as "distance." When observing individually, the estimates varied greatly; but when allowed to discuss as a group, the estimates invariably began to converge, and a group norm quickly developed. The group members seemed reluctant to diverge substantially from the standard of their group. More interestingly, when a confederate (a fake subject planted by the experimenter) was placed in each group and gave estimates that were consistently either very high or very low, other subjects would quickly report numbers toward the direction led by the confederate.

The meanings of this experiment, and a few others it inspired, have been pondered and re-pondered for more than half a century. The vulnerability of human mind was painfully revealed, and sadder still, the group contexts—where individuals try to figure out facts together—seemed to bring the silliness to a new level. This phenomenon known as "social influence" was since repeatedly demonstrated by other classic experiments, all in an equally dramatic fashion. Another experiment by Solomon Asch would show that subjects could not get an easy answer right if all the preceding group members (confederates) made a wrong choice. A third experiment by Stanley Milgram would show that subjects would willingly torture fellow subjects with high-voltage electric shocks if they are instructed to do so by the experimenter.

The era between the late 1930s and the early 1950s, when Sherif and other psychologists conducted their experiments, was influenced by many recent evil mass movements, and much social research tried to decode them. The mass support for Hitler was still a fresh memory, and communism was gaining momentum across the globe. The original motive, common in these experiments, was to examine human pathologies that gave rise to the social ills of the time. As a predominant interpretation, the findings were understood as revealing two human propensities: conformity to peers and obedience to authorities.

The Sherif Experiment represents a situation of extreme uncertainty. There was no reference point in the dark room to judge the alleged moving distance. Had a group of physicists been the subjects, most of them might have chosen to answer "I do not know." But literature about the experiment records no single real subject who answered this way, that is, the only correct way. Instead, each of them reported an estimate of the distance that did not exist, and hence readily subjected themselves to social influence or manipulation.

In comparison the experiment conducted by Solomon Asch represented a situation with great certainty. The task for the subjects was too easy to go wrong if they could resist other's erroneous influence. Asch's subjects, like Sherif's, were told that they were about to participate in an experiment on visual perception. In groups of seven to nine, they were asked to point out which of the three lines displayed

matched a standard line. Each person (judge) answered in turn. However, in each group, only one, the one who would answer last in each round, was the real subject and the rest in his or her group were confederates. The matching task was extremely easy; the subject got it right one hundred percent in the first rounds of trials in which the confederates did not deliberately misled him or her.

Then on the fourth trial, the subjects saw something very peculiar happen. Although this trial was no more difficult than the preceding ones, the first judge, with no hesitation or expression of indecision, offered a patently wrong answer. Instead of correctly matching the 1.5-inch standard line with a comparison line of the same length, this first judge opted for a comparison line only 0.5 inches long. (The remaining choice was 2 inches.) Inevitably, the subject's reaction was one of wide-eyed disbelief, a quick double check to make certain that the judge's response was as off-based as it seemed, and often a nervous giggle or some other expression of vicarious discomfort at his peer's folly. These feelings of disbelief and discomfort, however, were soon to be greatly heightened and to take on a different quality as the other group members all followed suit and repeated the same wrong answer. At last it is the lone subject's turn to answer and, in so doing, to decide whether to conform to the unanimous majority or to remain independent.¹

Asch initially expected that the vast majority of his subjects would remain independent in the face of the unanimous majority. But he was wrong. Manifested hesitation and discomfort notwithstanding, many of the subjects conformed. In repeated studies, the percentage of subjects who yielded to the erroneous answer at least once was between 50% and 80%. Overall, conformity occurred on over a third of all trials. It was reported that Asch designed his experiment to distill the pessimism implied in the result of Sherif's experiment; so in his report he emphasized one third of the subjects who never relented from their independent judgment. But it was the conformity level in his finding that shocked many other researchers. If it was so high in such an unambiguous situation, they maintained, what would happen in other situations?

If the above experiments demonstrate strong influence by equal peers, how about the influence from those who are designated as authorities? The more chilling findings were to be documented in a third experiment by Stanley Milgram, an experiment that shifted the discussion from conformity to obedience.

Upon their arrival, the subjects in Milgram's experiment met another "subject" (in fact, a confederate), a pleasant-mannered middle-aged man. The subjects were assigned as a "teacher", to punish the learner (confederate) whenever he gave a wrong answer. As the experiment progressed, the fake learner, i.e., the pleasant-mannered middle-aged man, would continuously give wrong answers, and the teacher, i.e., the experiment subject, was to increase the electric shock by one level each time the learner gave a wrong answer. The learner had been strapped into an electric-chair and an electrode was taped to his wrist. The teacher (the subject) increased the level of electric shocks through a 30-level switcher, ranging from 15 to 450 volts. The levels of the switcher were labeled with words like "slight shock" up to "danger: severe shock." The highest two levels were labeled as "xxx."

Initially, there are only verbal protests about the painfulness of the shocks, but the learner continues to participate. Then when the shock level reaches 300 volts, the learner pounds on the wall in protest, and from this point on, no answers from the learner appear on the panel display in front of the teacher. The learner does, however, continue pounding after each shock is administered. Then even[when] the pounding ceases. Throughout the procedure, the

¹ p.30 in *The Person and the Situation* by Lee Ross and Richard Nisbitt, Temple University Press, 1991. The book, especially chapter 2, can be used as a major source for other social psychological experiments cited in this essay.

experimenter restates the teacher's duties. If the teacher looks to the experimenter for guidance, the experimenter says, "Please continue."²

The findings of the Milgram experiment have shocked generations of social scientists and laypeople ever since: Most experiment subjects, or 68%, obeyed the instructions to the bitter end, beyond the "danger: severe shock" level, all the way to the final "450-volt, xxx" level.

No doubt those were depressing experiments to revisit. When I reemerge from those bygone laboratories, I feel empty-handed at first, because not much enlightenment is gained for my puzzlement about the American electorate public. To me, the empirical findings were never in doubt, because they have survived many follow-up tests in various settings. But I find that the interpretation of them—the claim about conformity and obedience as human nature—is not particularly helpful to unlock the mystery I am confronting.

Indeed, neither conformity nor obedience seems to be a convincing interpretation. First, conformity implies a normative pressure on individual action. If there is no sanction that may ensue for deviation from the majority's view, conformity may not be at work. In either Sherif's or Asch's experiment, such sanction mechanism seems to be absent, because subject groups were not organic in that members did not know one another beforehand and no one had any stake in how they behaved in the experiment. Second, in the same vein, obedience also implies sanction, in this case from power relations. In Milgram's experiment, the subject had the freedom to quit "torturing" the fellow subject any time, despite the fact that the experimenter insisted on going on. In other words, the sanction mechanism was also absent.

Whether they are apt, such interpretations as conformity and obedience seem to be satisfactory in explaining mass behavior in authoritarian regimes. In those countries, open dissent is oppressed and normative conformity is required. And citizens' basic rights are not protected so that obedience to authorities is a way of life. But in order to understand the misperception by the public in an open society, an alternative interpretation of the above experiments is warranted. That is the informational aspect of the social influence.

Other people are among the best sources of information about the world. If there appear to be two apples on the dining table, we can easily establish such a fact by our own observations. But if the judgment in question is of some greater ambiguity than this, for example, about whether an American invasion to Iraq would increase or decrease the likelihood of terrorism at home, the opinions of others become at once very valuable. Seen in this light, a common thread can be established across the above three experiments, all pointing to the tendency that subjects relied on others to establish their perception of the outside world.

In Sherif's experiment, there were no factual bases for any genuine observations, so that subjects resorted to one another. In Asch's experiment, although the facts were extremely clear and easy to observe, the unanimous majority, who was deliberately misleading, presented a challenge to the subjects' own observations. Many of them decided to revise their own judgment to resolve the inconsistency. Interestingly, in follow-up studies, Asch found that the erroneous majority had to be unanimous in order to exert an effective influence. When the subject was provided an independent ally, the percentage of both conforming subjects and the frequency of conforming acts dropped precipitously, even if the subject and the ally were preceded by seven or eight misleading confederates. In Milgram's experiment, the informational interpretation also seems to be more plausible. Maybe the subject did not *obey* the experimenter as an authority, as previous interpretations suggested; instead, he or she relied on the experimenter for *information* since the experimenter seemed to know best. The reaction of the

² . p.54 in Ross and Nisbitt, 1991, see footnote 1.

experimenter may have indicated to the subject that the situation was unproblematic despite protests by the “tortured” subject.

In so interpreting this informational perspective rejects any notion of irrationality at the individual level. That is, a perfectly sensible person could join a process of social construction of reality with a result that is entirely off-base. There are two key factors that contribute to the likelihood of such an act. One is whether he or she is in the position to gather information of their own. Sherif’s experiment shows that if there is no independent way of information gathering, the social influence, erroneous or not, will become the major, if not the only, force in shaping public views. The second concerns the strength of the social influence, i.e., whether the influence is coming from unanimity, a majority, or a minority. Asch’s experiment has suggested that many are not be able to resist an erroneous influence if posed as a unanimous view.

The informational approach was articulated by later social psychologists since Sherif, Asch and Milgram. Let me cite yet another experiment in line with this new argument. The experiment tried to explain a common phenomenon called “Inhibition of Bystander Intervention.” The reason of the “inhibition” was believed to be informational dynamics of the situation.

In the morning hours of March 13, 1964, a 28-year old woman named Kitty Genovese was murdered in a middle-class section of Queens, New York. The case later shocked the country, not because it was more gruesome than others, but because many people were present in the murder scene but no one came to her aid. For over a 30-minutes period, the victim was stabbed repeatedly by an assailant. She shouted for help continually during that time; and according to police reports, at least 38 people heard and were aware of the incident. But no one intervened in any way. No one called the police.

After the murder, the news media quickly attributed the lack of intervention as evidence of the moral decay in urban life. But two social psychologists, John Darley and Bibb Latane, saw it differently. They hypothesized that in this incident, and many others in which groups of bystanders failed to help victims of accidents, illnesses, or crimes, potential interveners had been inhibited not by indifference but rather by important aspects of social situation—that is, by the very presence of other potential helpers and their apparent inaction. Group situations, they argue, can inhibit bystander intervention because others’ inaction may present as a source of information and one may perceive the situation as unproblematic based on that information. By contrast, if the bystander is alone, he or she may define the situation and hence act differently.

This hypothesis was confirmed by their experiments. In one such study conducted at Columbia University, individuals were asked to work on a task under different conditions—alone, or with other passive confederates. At one point, they were let to hear what could be believed as a bad fall of a female on the other side of the movable room divider. The result was striking. Seventy percent of the solitary bystanders, in comparison with only 7 percent of those working with other passive confederates, intervened to offer assistance. By 1980, four dozen follow-up studies had been undertaken—some using feigned emergencies in the confines of the laboratory, others exposing unwitting bystanders to simulated accidents, illnesses, or thefts, occurring in the streets, stores, elevators, and subway cars. And in about 90 percent of the comparisons, lone bystanders proved more likely to help than did people in groups.

One implication from the informational approach to interpret the classic experiments discussed in this essay is that when it comes to issues with great ambiguity, the public perception can also get very off-base even in an open and democratic society. A second implication, in light of Asch’s follow-up studies, is that the existence of open dissent has a great potential to undercut the erroneous social influence (that may explain why dictators hate dissent so much). A third implication derives from the second—building false consensus is a key means of propaganda. That explains why public rituals like rallies, marches are

prevalent wherever there is politics, democratic or not. In this kind of settings, participants often act in unison (chanting, clapping, flag waving, etc.) so that a sense of unanimity is conveyed to sway perceptions.

No wonder nationalism is one of the effective tools for political manipulation. To ordinary Americans, foreign policy issues are arcane. To many, they must be like the distance the single light “moved” in Sherif’s dark laboratory. When time is good economically, the presidential campaign mantra is “It’s the economy, Stupid!”, reminding people to vote with their pocketbooks. When time is bad, like in George W. Bush’s first term, the election campaign would be waged about foreign policies and war. If there is no excuse for war, one would be manufactured. As we have already witnessed in this year’s election and the four years before that, political manipulation worked wonders. Whatever excuse for the Iraq War the Bush team provided, the majority of the public just went right for it. First it was the alleged Al Qaeda connection with Saddam, then it was about Weapons of Mass Destruction, and finally it was about “spreading the democracy.” Many American voters locked step with their president, sometimes like the poor subjects in Sherif’s experiment, following the implanted confederates who gave extreme estimates of the “distance,” sometimes like the poor subjects in Milgram’s experiment, who wholeheartedly trusted the “experimenter” who assured the situation with high-voltage electric shocks and painful screams as unproblematic.

Therefore, public perceptions are helplessly vulnerable, subject to manipulation. This is particularly true in times when with a high degree of ambiguity or with a sense of emergency—real or manufactured. Under these conditions, individuals tend not to observe and think for themselves but to follow others. The heightened sense of emergency since the fateful day of September 11, 2001 has led the United States into a new historic time. It may take a long time before many in the American public see certain things straight as they really are—injustice as injustice, blood as blood, and danger as danger. Their ignorance does not come from any inherent viciousness or individual irrationality, but as an outcome of a time-honored group dynamic.

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